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ABSTRACT

Among several innovations in public school curriculum and financing, the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) also included a school-governance provision. School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) Councils include administrators, teachers, and parents in addressing school-level curriculum and instructional issues. These groups have not had a history of collaboration. This paper presents findings of a study that described the developing relationships among these constituent groups at the end of the pilot year. Data were derived from a survey that asked 385 pilot-year School Council members to rate their satisfaction with council communication on a Likert-type inventory. Usable responses were received from 211 members (approximately one-third principals, one-third parents, and one-third teachers) for a response rate of 55 percent. In general, respondents were optimistic about the potential of School Councils. However, principals tended to express the most satisfaction. Older members and those with no children in school also tended to report higher levels of satisfaction with communication. Five tables are included. (LMI)

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DEVELOPING SCHOOL BASED DECISION MAKING CAPACITIES IN KENTUCKY: COMMUNICATION SATISFACTION AFTER THE PILOT YEAR

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Abstract

Among several innovations in public school curriculum and financing the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) also included a school governance provision. School Based Decision Making (SBDM) Councils include administrators, teachers, and parents in addressing school-level curriculum and instructional issues. These groups have not had a history of collaboration. The purpose of this study was to describe the developing relationships among these constituent groups at the end of the pilot year. Pilot year School Council members were surveyed concerning communication satisfaction. In general, people were optimistic about the potential of School Councils. Principals tended to be the most satisfied. Differences in satisfaction among Council members also were linked significantly to demographic variable of age and the presence of their own children in school.

DEVELOPING SCHOOL BASED DECISION MAKING CAPACITIES IN KENTUCKY: COMMUNICATION SATISFACTION AFTER THE PILOT YEAR

Introduction

In 1990 the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) was signed into law, and the Commonwealth's record in educational efforts switched from scattered and unremarkable to comprehensive and notable. The law specifically revises aspects of a public school system declared unconstitutional by the state's supreme court (*Rose v. Council for Better Education, Inc.*, 1989). Provisions include changes in curriculum, finance, and governance. The governance section imposes strict guidelines on nepotism and political intimidation of school employees, but perhaps the most fundamental governance reform is the requirement of School Based Decision Making (SBDM) in all schools by 1995-96 (Steffy, 1993).

School (SBDM) Councils are comprised of the school's principal who serves as chair, three teacher representatives, and two parent representatives. In larger schools, these groups are represented in the same proportions with multiple representatives of parents, teachers, and administrators. Teacher representatives are elected by the school's faculty. Parent representatives are voted on by members of the largest parent organization associated with the school, usually a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or a Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). By the fall of 1991-92, each school district was to have at least one School Council in operation. More than 300 Councils operated during 1991-92, nearly twice the minimally required 176

(Kentucky Department of Education, 1993).

This research was part of a larger study describing the implementation of parent involvement through school based decision making in Kentucky. The larger study occurred in two phases. In the first phase, reported elsewhere (Lindle, 1992b), School Council chairpeople volunteered the methods they used to inform and include parents in decision-making activities. The research described here sought School Council members' satisfaction with communication in the Council. This is a summary of the second phase of the project.

Parent Involvement, Participative Decision Making, and Communication Satisfaction

Parent involvement has long been recognized as a key factor in student achievement (Epstein, 1987a; Fullan, 1985; Purkey and Smith, 1983). Most schools involve parents in several traditional ways; helping with homework, being an audience, helping with school activities (parties, field trips), or providing financial support (Epstein, 1987b; Henderson *et al*, 1986; Williams and Chavkin, 1986). Research (Chavkin and Williams, 1985; Lindle, 1992a) shows that parents are eager, but educators are reluctant, to include parents in the decision making processes of schooling.

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA)'s provisions for parent involvement in educational decision making is among landmark legislation in the United States. Not since the Education for Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) have parents been guaranteed a say in decision making. KERA's provision for

inclusion of parents in the governance of schools represents an uncommon approach to parent involvement.

In fact, participative decision making at the school level is usually designed to increase the power and authority of teachers and administrators rather than parents (Clune and White, 1988; Frymier, 1987; Goodlad, 1984; Maeroff, 1988). One of the benefits of this kind of governance is increased efficiency in the allocation of resources (Briggs and Lawton, 1989). Although there is little empirical evidence to support the presumed benefits of participative decision making (Malen, Ogawa and Kranz, 1989), KERA included this reform of school governance. The Kentucky legislature assumed that parents, teachers, and principals should make decisions about curriculum and instruction. Moreover, the legislature set up a complex, outcome driven assessment system in order to hold school personnel accountable for their decisions (Legislative Research Commission, 1990).

One of the challenges for Kentucky is to integrate groups of parents, teachers, and administrators which have been traditionally isolated in their educational roles. Kentucky's goal for SBDM to institute collaborative discourse and consensus in setting policy for schools. Under KERA, School Councils are to set policy in the following areas;

- Determination of curriculum, including needs assessment and curriculum development;
- Assignment of all instructional and noninstructional staff time;
- Assignment of students to classes and programs within the school;

- Determination of the schedule of the school day and week, subject to the beginning and ending times of the school day and school calendar year as established by the local board;
- Determination of use of school space during the school day;
- Planning and resolution of issues regarding instructional practices;
- Selection and implementation of discipline and classroom management techniques, including responsibilities of the student, parent, teacher, counselor, and principal;
- Selection of extracurricular programs and determination of policies relating to student participation based on academic qualification and attendance requirements, program evaluation and supervision; and
- Procedures, consistent with local school board policy, for determining alignment with state standards, technology utilization, and program appraisal (*Kentucky Revised Statutes*, 1992).

Each of these areas represent contested concepts and implementation strategies among the educational community. Including parents in the dialogue about these areas raises the intensity of the discussion. In general, teachers and administrators view parents as outsiders who are ill-informed about educational issues. The quality of communications among these groups represents a critical factor for success in the implementation of the School Council governance provision.

The concept of communication quality has been variously investigated. Communication is important on interpersonal and organizational levels (Lysaught,

1984). Studies of communication have linked effective organizational function to communication satisfaction (Argyris, 1957; Downs and Hazen, 1977; Likert, 1961, 1967; March and Simon, 1958; Simon, 1957). The concept of communication satisfaction has been primarily investigated through survey research (Downs and Hazen, 1977; Gregson, 1991; Hecht, 1978; Newton and Burgoon, 1990).

Emerging work in the field of communications posits complex social constructions of appropriate and purposive communicative behaviors (Applegate, 1990; O'Keefe, 1988; O'Keefe and Delia, 1982). Communication satisfaction is a rudimentary construct concerning social interaction. It has been defined as an affective response to the fulfillment of expectations regarding another's communicative behavior (Hecht, 1978). As a crucial indicator of the development, adjustment and maintenance of relationships, communication satisfaction results from support and validation of one's expressed positions (Newton and Burgoon, 1990).

The implementation of the parent involvement provision of KERA raises issues about its effects. As pilot School Councils ended their first year of operation, concern about the quality and development of relationships among the three constituent groups were raised. Because communication satisfaction is one indication of these relationships, this phase of the larger study focused on the following question; what are the perceptions of the School Council members concerning the quality of communications in Council activities?

Methods

This phase of the larger study was a random survey of School Council members. A sample of 385 representatives of pilot School Councils stratified on their positions as parents, teachers, and principals were sent a mailed survey. Along with general demographic data and categorical questions concerning Council training and meeting procedures, respondents' perceptions of satisfaction with School Council communications were elicited. The purpose of the categorical data was to confirm the findings of the first phase of the project.

Instrumentation

Some have argued that communication satisfaction is a multi-dimensional construct (Downs and Hazen, 1977). Others have found only a uni-dimensional factor (Hecht, 1978). Most surveys have solicited perceptions about communications satisfaction using a Likert-scale.

In this study, the Communication Satisfaction Scale had 12 Likert-type items based on Hecht's (1978) *Communication Satisfaction Inventory*. Hecht developed his scale from 253 items. Through numerous tests of the scale, Hecht created a 19 item unidimensional instrument (Hecht, 1978; Newton and Burgoon, 1990).

For this research, twelve items pertaining to the context of Kentucky's School Councils were designed using Hecht's *Inventory* as a template. Approximately 25 items were submitted to a small Delphi panel. An area college professor of Communications and a parent active in state and local school politics served on the Delphi panel. No pilot tests were conducted due to the small size of the population

($n \equiv 1800$) and the possibility of contamination.

The questions sought personal assessments of Council interaction. For example,

> Other School Council members listen to my ideas.
> or
> The principal supplies the background information I need to discuss School Council agenda items.

The five response options ranged from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." There also was a "Don't Know/Not Applicable" option.

Limitations

This study asked for personal perceptions of School Council communications. Each strata of parents, teachers, and principals were selected in random fashion. No matches were made on the basis of school district, School Council, or region. In order to preserve confidentiality and to assure a reasonable response rate there was no coding of materials nor questions requiring identification of schools. Given these conditions, there is a chance for uncontrolled bias in the responses. However, given the demographic responses concerning their home regions of Kentucky and personal characteristics, there is no reason to suspect systematic anomalies in the random data.

Analysis

The scores were disaggregated based on demographic data. Categorical and mean responses were compared statistically using non-parametric and parametric tests of group differences. Comments were reviewed for content and themes.

Results

Demographic Information

There was a 55% (211/385) response rate. An almost equal number of principals (67), parents (73), and teachers (70) responded. The vast majority of respondents were white (99%) which is to be expected given Kentucky's small -- only 7% --- minority population.

There were twice as many females (138) as males (68). Among those responding to demographic questions, most of the teacher (61/70 or 87%) and parent (51/71 or 71%) respondents were female and more of the principals (39/64 or 61%) were male. Not surprisingly, this demographic difference yielded a significant χ^2 ($p < .05$). See Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Eighty-five percent of the respondents (179) were married. Nearly all of the parents (69/73 or 95%) were married with teacher and principal respondents representing larger proportions of single people than parents (19% of each group).

Sixty-eight percent of the 120 counties in Kentucky were represented by the responses. All regions (eastern, central, northern, western and Louisville and surrounding counties) of Kentucky were represented. The two regions with the largest responses were the western (68) and eastern (52) regions of Kentucky.

Most of the respondents had no children in school, with the exception of the parent respondents. Only 10 of the teachers and 6 of the principals reported having children in school. This phenomenon was supported by the relative ages of the

responding parents, teachers, and principals.

Although the average age of respondents was around 43 years, there was significant χ^2 ($p < .00$) over the variables of age and position on Council. (See Table 2). Principals tended to be older (47.1 years) than teachers (43.4 years) who tended to be older than parents (around 39.4 years).

Insert Table 2 About Here

Categorical Responses

These Councils began operating during 1991. More of the Councils reported a lapse of a month or more between their election and the beginning of meetings.

Council members reported several days and/or continuous activity in training for Council responsibilities. For the vast majority, training has been supported by their School Districts' funds.

In scheduling Council meetings, Councils tried to use parents' schedules or to make accommodations for as many school and community events as possible. As a result, meetings are scheduled for evenings.

In general, Councils either have not discussed responsibilities for communicating with parents or have relied primarily on the principal. A few Councils rely on their Councils' parent representatives to carry out this duty.

There were great variations in the numbers of parents who voted for Council representatives. Numbers ranged from under 10 to over 100. About one third of the respondents said between 20 and 30 parents voted in these elections.

Councils do tend to appoint parents to standing and *ad hoc* committees. Usually, there is at least one parent per committee, and typically there are between 6 and 10 committees. The responses to this question varied widely with up to 50 parents involved in committee activities.

Nearly all the Councils extend some form of invitation to parents to attend meetings. Parent participation at meetings was reported from none to 60. Several comments were made about the difficulty of involving parents in these meetings. The comments were just as likely to claim lack of parent involvement whether the numbers were zero or 60.

As a rule, parents who attend meetings are allowed to speak at some point during the Council meetings. Few parents are specifically invited to be speakers at meetings.

Nearly all the Councils receive services such as minutes, agenda, and background materials. Some Councils receive food and transportation. No Councils have provided baby sitting services for members.

Very few Council members travel more than five miles to their meetings. Several principals and teachers who commute to their schools reported staying at school until the meeting times.

Councils use five or fewer methods to communicate with parents in the community. This confirms results from the first phase of the larger study.

Inferential Analyses

Reliability coefficients were computed for the Communication Satisfaction Scale. The Cronbach's Alpha for the scale was .84. This coefficient represents 71% of the variance. This is an acceptable reliability coefficient for the initial development of a scale. Scale item scores were totaled and used for the inferential analyses.

A significant t-test was found for Communication Satisfaction scores and the variable of children in school ($p < .01$). (See Table 3.) People without children in school (most of the principals and teachers) had significantly higher communication satisfaction scores than did people with children in school (all of the parents and a few of the teachers and principals).

Insert Table 3 About Here

Table 4 shows that communication satisfaction also varied significantly ($p < .014$) with age. People over 45 were significantly more satisfied than younger people.

Insert Table 4 About Here

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of communication satisfaction over Council position (teacher, parent, or principal) also was significant at $p < .000$. (See Table 5.) According to a post-hoc Scheffé test, principals scored significantly ($p < .05$) above teachers and parents.

Insert Table 5 About Here

Content Analysis of Comments

The survey included several opportunities for respondents to offer open responses or comments. Over 40% of the respondents (94) wrote additional comments on their surveys. These comments were content analyzed and sorted into categories.

The two largest categories of responses, with 35 comments each, were "Communications Issues" and "Basis for Scheduling Council Meetings." A third category with 25 responses was "Reactions to SBDM Councils."

Most of the comments (30 or 86%) about "Communication Issues" were ideas or suggestions for improving communications within and about the School Council.

> We're looking at possible newsletters...parent representative
>
> I think phone chains should be established at every grade level. Parents get so many memos, they don't always attend to them. Also, a personal contact often inspires people to get involved and helps them to feel valued...teacher representative
>
> Bi-monthly reports [are given] at PTO meetings...principal

Other concerns were statements about the quality of communication and some problems with parent communication.

> School Council members communicate openly with each other, excluding the principal ...teacher representative
>
> All parents are welcome, but few come...teacher representative
>
> This [communicating with parents] has not been done...parent representative

Comments about the "Basis for Scheduling Council Meetings" were about

equally split. According to those commenting, some Councils (13 or 37%) set meetings around the Council members' schedules. Other comments suggested that some Councils (11 or 31%) tried to consider the schedules of parents at-large.

The reactions to SBDM Council comments were generally positive. More than two-thirds of the comments (17 or 68%) were favorable about the importance of SBDM Councils to school reform. A few respondents (9) expressed disillusionment with SBDM and/or particular Council members or incidents. Several people (8 or 32%) also raised issues over the amount of time spent in the implementation of School Council activities.

> I've been impressed with my fellow Council members and their unselfish giving of time...parent representative
>
> School Council works!...parent representative
>
> Our first year has gone super! We hired our principals and are very pleased with the processes of SBDM. We do have areas of weakness which we are working on, but all in all, it is one of the best things that could have happened to Kentucky's schools...teacher representative

Conclusions

In general, the respondents were positive about School Based Decision Making and concerned about parent involvement and its effects on the implementation of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act. There were significant differences in perceived communication satisfaction among groups of School Council members based on position and age.

Communication satisfaction among Council members was favorable, but varied

based on position in the Council. Principals reported significantly more satisfaction than any other group. Perhaps these differences were due to differences in expectations for School Based Decision Making --- a construct which was not measured in this study. The significant result suggests a beginning in socially constructed norms for School Council member communications. Comments by parents and teachers expressed frustration with time spent on by-law development --- and example of an accomplishment to which principals might attach more satisfaction than others.

The demographic differences between parents, teachers and administrators affected communication satisfaction scores in ways which were not specified in this study. Teachers and principals tended to be older than parents which can contribute to differences in expectations and ccmmunications. Teachers and principals also tended not to have children in school which is another potential force on communications. For the most part, principals were predominantly male while teachers and parents tended to be female, and these gender differences have been shown to affect communication patterns in other studies.

The results of this study suggest some directions for practice and research.

Recommendations for Practice

Information from this study could be used in the training of School Council members. Communication satisfaction among all groups might improve if Council members were more aware of demographic differences among themselves and their

constituencies.

Principals in schools which have not yet established Councils should be encouraged by their colleagues' level of satisfaction with Council communication. On the other hand, principals operating and establishing Councils ought to discover more about the expectations of teachers and parents. This proactive stance by principals could help improve the communication satisfaction of the other groups.

Teachers and principals need to recognize that age differences between themselves and parents can affect quality of communications. Additionally, having, or not having, a child in school can have an effect on communications in School Councils.

The process of checking satisfaction periodically during School Council development may be a useful exercise. Purposive communications requires complex shared understandings of appropriate channels for communication. The reliability of this instrument suggests its usefulness for this type of exercise.

Recommendations for Research

This study provides only a preliminary glimpse of the ways Kentucky's parents, teachers, and administrators are developing relationships in their new governance structures. The provision for parent involvement in SBDM raises other questions about parent and educator collaboration. For example, do political behaviors become a norm for the communications of SBDM Council members? Do School Councils make efforts to broaden parent or community participation beyond the elected membership?

Does the presence of parents in educative decision-making illuminate parent involvement as an agenda for SBDM decision-making?

As Kentucky's provisions for SBDM Councils becomes more broadly implemented, some of these questions may be addressed. Surveys, such as the one in this study, can alert us to trends in the implementation of KERA. As School Councils mature, more in depth analysis using multiple research methods will be possible.

Perceptions of parents not on School Councils, also must be obtained. A study of their communication satisfaction would be very informative for the development of School Councils.

The reform of school governance in Kentucky appears to be a motivating provision for members of School Councils. Many of them express hope in the future with some uncertainty about their role in reform. Much is to be learned about SBDM, to assure that School Council members verify their place in the historic implementation of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act.

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Table 1
Council Position by Gender

Council Position	Gender	
	Males	Females
Parents	20	51
Principals	39	25
Teachers	9	61

Chi-Square	36.67
Degrees of Freedom	3
Significance	.00

Table 2
Council Position by Age

Council Position	Age	
	45 and under	over 45
Parents	64	9
Teachers	47	23
Principals	27	37

Chi-Square	33.59
Degrees of Freedom	3
Significance	.00

Table 3
t-Test of Groups With or Without
Children in School
on Communications Satisfaction Scores

Groups	n	Mean	S.D.	S.E.
No child	98	48.02	5.82	.588
With child	88	45.58	7.03	.750

Pooled Variance Estimate

t-Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-tailed Probability
2.59	184	.010

Table 4
t-Test of Age Groups on
Communication Satisfaction Scores

Groups	n	Mean	S.D.	S.E.
45 & under	136	46.32	6.88	.590
Over 45	65	48.72	5.27	.654

Pooled Variance Estimate

t-Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-tailed Probability
-2.48	199	.014

Table 5
ANOVA of Council Position on
Communication Satisfaction Scores

Groups	Means	n
Total Population	47.02	203
Principals	49.95	62
Teachers	46.79	68
Parents	44.75	73

Source	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Significance
Main Effects	911.34	2	455.67	12.01	.000
Position	911.34	2	455.67	12.01	.000
Explained	911.34	2	455.67	12.01	.000
Residual	7589.53	200	37.95		
TOTAL	8500.88	202	42.08		